

Workers and youth speak out against French government and budget crisis

WSWS reporting team
22 September 2025

Around 1 million people marched on September 18 in a nationwide protest strike against the budget crisis and the incoming minority government of French Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu. Over 260 marches took place in cities across France, as workers in mass transit, public schools and energy facilities struck, alongside university students. Estimates gave 55,000 people marching in Paris; several tens of thousands marched in Toulouse, Marseille, Bordeaux, Lyon and Lille.

Opposition is continuing to mount at President Emmanuel Macron's funding war and military spending increases via social cuts. At the same time, left-wing dissatisfaction is also building with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's New Popular Front (NFP), which together with the union bureaucracies sold out and shut down mass strikes in 2023 against pension cuts opposed by a vast majority of the French people. Broader layers of workers are pointing to the role these forces have played in enabling Macron to rule against the people.

WSWS reporters intervened at the main protest march in Paris, interviewing workers and youth and distributing a Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES) statement, "Build rank-and-file committees to wage the struggle against Macron and war!"

Lucca, a Franco-Brazilian university student, told the WSWS: "Macron and the entire French government are slashing budgets for education, research, university meals, which helps the most vulnerable, to raise military budgets amid war and an international rise in geopolitical tensions. Just piling on the weapons and the tensions and exploit the vulnerable to increase war, it's senseless. If we want a solution, we have to increase taxes on the wealthiest individuals."

Lucca said he was dissatisfied with the right-wing parties in government but also not enthusiastic about the NFP led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Unbowed (LFI) party. Pointing to the four changes of government over the last two years, he said: "Government instability is a sign that the French are dissatisfied ... But then I'm not a great fan of Mélenchon, either. I don't think he really represents my ideals, but I think he might be a solution. He's what we have for now. That said, I'm not a big defender of Mélenchon."

Lucca agreed that the movement in the working class is international, saying: "In Brazil, we have the same types of

people, students, workers, the most vulnerable people who are dissatisfied and want general change. There, recently we had a big step forward. Bolsonaro, the former president, he tried to organize a coup d'état in 2022. Just now, he was condemned to 27 years in jail. It's a big change, but it's not enough. Everything has to change."

When the WSWS raised the issue of independently organizing the working class to prepare a general strike to bring down Macron, he agreed and pointed to mass protests in Asia: "That's what we have to do. Everyone has to get out and protest, as today everyone is affected. ... Everyone has to mobilize, we have to do things like in Nepal."

Helena Monteiro, a General Confederation of Labor (CGT) delegate in janitorial services, stressed rising economic pressure on workers and social inequality: "Life has gotten expensive, we need raises and for the elderly, pension increases. There are those who do not work, and we who work. There must be equality. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer."

When the WSWS asked what she thought of the incoming government, she replied: "Oh no, we've got to throw them out. We need a new president. Things have got to get better, because really it's impossible now. Everything goes up, except our wages. We don't make it to the end of the month."

The WSWS spoke to two teachers, Laura and Claire, working in a junior high in an immigrant district of Paris, who denounced recent education reforms. "Students who are struggling are sacrificed, good cheer in the classroom is sacrificed," said Claire, while Laura said: "The rooms where teachers take their breaks are also more and more depoliticized, there isn't a strong collective debate anymore."

When the WSWS asked about the union bureaucracies' role in demobilizing mass opposition, in particular through their sell-out of the 2023 pensions struggle, Laura replied: "You do get the feeling the trade unions are implicated in this, too. We did all of that, we all went on strike together, and they just said, 'Oh well, too bad.' There is a real problem."

Laura and Claire stressed their concern with growing military spending. "We have a state that is increasingly militarist. We see where funding goes, we're not duped," said Claire, while Laura added: "Funding priorities are totally absurd, the

education system gets peanuts and then ridiculous PR stunts. Each minister is more incompetent than the last. People are really fed up. Luckily we have our students, because the institution itself has gotten outright abusive.”

Laura concluded: “Politics as we have known it is obsolete. I think that we will have to find a way to mobilize alongside the youth.”

Louis, a history student, told the WSWS he was attending the Paris protest to “fight austerity, a minority government that imposes things on us and colludes with the French oligarchs.” France is controlled, he said, by “a sort of bourgeois aristocracy, individuals who always show up with all the politicians, be they left or right.” He stressed that the people who run French politics are completely out of touch with social reality.

“These are people who think the average Frenchman makes €5000 a month,” he said, whereas the median French salary is €1940. “I’m a student, I work in a nightclub, I get a minimal salary doing night shifts. I’m killing myself working a crappy job.”

Louis stressed austerity’s impact on students: “They cut our university’s budget €3 million, closing down master’s degrees, not replacing professors who are retiring. ... When you look at social aid for students, cafeterias, housing aid, every year they cut access to and the amount of the aid.”

Louis, who comes from a rural area with many voters of the neo-fascist National Rally (RN), pointed to the Macron government’s role in driving the RN’s rise: “The government constantly repeats that immigration costs a lot, it’s a state lie. If you look things up even a little bit, it’s clear immigration is a drop in the bucket of state spending. ... You see that everywhere, also in America. There are protests there, sort of on similar bases as ours, like against ICE, that is, like here in France, the demonization of immigrants, using them as scapegoats.”

Explaining how the RN’s cynical nationalist demagogic obscures class issues, Louis said: “The RN uses immigration-bashing to give gifts to CEOs and French capital, they don’t raise the minimum wage to help their voters. RN voters, there are white collar managers, but a lot of farmers or workers who are misinformed by this media horde, either CNews or even public radio now.”

At the same time, Louis stressed the responsibility for the RN’s rise of LFI and its NFP alliance with the bourgeois Socialist Party (PS) and Stalinist and Green groups: “If you look at LFI, their political strategy is to focus on youth in immigrant suburbs and to forget, as you say, workers in small cities in the north. ... The RN picked up parts of the electorate the left abandoned, telling them immigration is the problem, whereas the real problem is austerity imposed by our government to benefit the wealthy in our country.”

When WSWS reporters insisted on the need to build an international revolutionary movement in the working class,

based on rank-and-file organizations working outside the structures of official politics, Louis pointed to the complex issues this raised in the history of the communist movement. He said, “A workers international, for me, is the only way to overthrow capitalism. That would mean really having working class consciousness, like people hoped the communists would have before. But we lost that, and I think it’s been very hard to have that over the last 30 years.”

At the same time, Louis stressed his disillusionment with the established organizations that the media market to the public as the left: “It’s also true, though, that there are people in the unions who have their own interests, who get contacted and go to the other side. For instance, you look at the PS, these are people who always say they are left-wing, but they always pursue right-wing policies and, at the first opportunity, always work out a way to impose austerity.”

Faced with such political obstacles, amid escalating wars, attacks on the working class and threats of dictatorship internationally, workers and youth will find no simple solutions. As the PES explained in its statement:

The defense of the fundamental social and democratic rights of the working class requires a mass mobilization of the rank and file, fighting for the self-organization of the working class and the preparation of a general strike to bring down Macron. This is inseparable from the construction of a political movement in the working class, in France and across Europe, for workers’ power and a socialist revolution.

The PES calls for the transfer of power in all factories and workplaces from the union bureaucracies to the rank and file. To wage this struggle, workers need rank-and-file organizations to overcome the opposition of union bureaucracies whose “social dialog” ties workers to the diktat of the capitalist state.



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